476 A man would go to town and buy two or more pottles of flax
571 to sow. Then on the first of May he would go to the garden
and plant it. In August he would pull it up by the roots and
●248 lay it in small bundles to be made into stooks. Then they would
take it and put it into a bog and leave it there fifteen or twenty
days, after which they could dry it in the house by hanging it
from the rafters. About the first of November you would take
it down and some men would come in and help break it. They
would then put it back and later take it down and scutch it with
a pronged tool, drawing the flax over it and breaking it.

476 Some time about Christmas time you would have a *meitheal*
571 of girls come in and they would sit in a semicircle round the
fire and clove the flax. It would take several days depending
283 on how much you had. The girls would stay with you all that
time. At seven in the evening they would be through and
within half an hour you could hear them in the hills leaping
and shouting. About eight or eight-thirty the boys would begin
[535] to arrive and there would be a dance and be no more good out
of them for that night. They might have a dance every two or
three days. You fed them good.

The next thing was the hackling, and this might be done by men or women. You had a box with iron prongs sticking up and you would hit the stalk against the irons and the small particles would fall into the box below. It might take several nights. Old man Roughan was a great man at the hackling, but he was always great for nothing else to do with flax. It was fine if you got him to come and help you and he would be glad to do it. Then you might be good at something else and you would go and help him with that. Some men were good at one thing and others at something else and they would help each other.

After this the next thing was the spinning, and this was done by the woman. She would sit in this corner by the fire and she might be there every night, or whenever she had the time, spinning the flax fiber into thread. She had no one to help her and it was a hard job. After it was made into thread, it would
[266] be taken out and bleached and re-wound and then taken to the weaver. The weaver made it into cloth and you would use it for sheets and shirts and other things. Flax was a hard thing and there was a lot of hard work about it.

248 They have been out of growing it for thirty or forty years

1:Arensberg & Kimball E-5 (1932-1934) 1940
ER6 Rural Irish ER6
County Clare

and now they would never think of growing it but must be running to town and buying what they want.

The process of conversion of wool to yarn and thence into cloth was equally difficult. It demanded the concerted efforts of most of the rural community. It gave scope for the development of specialists who could give their skills back and forth even though, as before, their skills were part of the equipment of all the young people in the community. Two other old fellows of Inagh combined in the following account:

> With the wool it was sheared on May 15 and, if that fell on a Monday or Tuesday and the following was Saturday in town (market day) you would see the men there with wool to sell while others would be there to buy it with large baskets in which to put it. The first thing was to card the wool. About the first of June you would get ready to spin it. For that you go around to all the neighbors and ask for a loan of a girl to spin the wool, and if you got eight or ten you must get the loan of that many spinning wheels. Then they come to the house on a certain day and I have seen eight wheels in this room and two in the other, all the girls spinning and talking away. It might take several days before they were through and they would have a dance and the boys would come around. You want to be sure to get the girls early for there is a great demand for them. After the yarn is spun, it is placed on the wall to be taken to the weaver later on.

All this was part of the pattern of work in which the members of the community were accustomed to work in close association. The behavior described here is that which we have already looked at in the discussion of the obligations of cooring. The *meitheal* referred to the working gang rather than the system in which the local habits were set. That setting was a constant play of habitual work relations between the "friends" and neighbors of the local community in which the characteristic organization of the community aligned sex and age groups and associated the

9: Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1942
ER6 Rural Irish ER6

Flax is virtually confined to Northern Ireland, where the bulk of it is produced on the rich soils of the Bann and the Main. Turnips and mangels are pretty widely distributed but sugar-beet is mainly grown in the valley of the Barrow.

In recent years about 60 % of the surface of Ireland has been devoted to stock-raising, and when it is remembered that a large proportion of the corn and root crops also goes to feed stock it will be seen that the pastoral industries predominate. Dairy cows, an essential part of the equipment of the peasant farm, are widely distributed, but in the commercial production of butter there is a strong concentration around the foci of Cork and Limerick, where co-operative creameries are favoured by the relative ease of transport, for example in the fertile "Golden Vale." These dairying regions also stand out as beef-producing areas, for Irish cattle are dual purpose animals bred for meat as well as milk. But the best fattening lands run round the northern and eastern sides of the Central Plain, and County Meath is justly famed in this connexion.

The dry limestone pastures of east Galway and hilly tracts such as the Wicklows and the Sperrins are outstanding as areas of sheep-rearing, and surprising numbers are kept on the slopes of the western mountains, the wool going to make the homespuns of the Gaeltacht. Pig-breeding is heaviest in the south-west, where the dairying industry supplies skimmed milk. As a domestic animal attached to the small farms, the pig is by no means so typically Irish as is often assumed. But one often comes across empty pigsties, some of them of archaic construction (Chapter 9) which testify to their importance in the past: one minor factor in the decline is the fact that in the days of active poteen-making pigs were conveniently fed on the waste products.

On the other hand poultry of all kinds have maintained and even increased their popularity. The old breed of hen still favoured in the west is a small black bird, active, intelligent and extremely domesticated. The potato has encouraged the keeping of poultry, and Arthur Young

9: Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1942
ER6 Rural Irish ER6

ing the hay to the haggard presents itself, quick advantage can be taken of the weather by transporting the cocks as single loads by the simple process of putting a rope round the bottom and hauling them with a horse or two to the haggard. I have also seen a long iron runner placed under the cock, which is thus " sliped " home, but on larger farms a hay-cart is employed. The Irish hay-cart is a specialized vehicle, used for no other purpose: its low platform can be backed against the cock, which is then drawn on to it by a winding gear. This is an interesting example of the versatility which the Irish have shown in developing the two-wheeled cart, their primary mode of transport (Chapter 12). When other horse-drawn implements are employed in hay-making they are frequently old-fashioned in their sturdy simplicity, for example the wooden hay rake or " sweep " with its long ash teeth.

In the haggard (" hay-guard ") the stacks are built on prepared foundations of stones and heather or bushes which " draw the wind in under." Sometimes one sees them built around an upright pole, as in the Tyrol and elsewhere abroad. The stacks are either circular (" pikes " in Co. Antrim) or oblong (" havels "): there are advantages and disadvantages attaching to both shapes and it is doubtful whether, as has been suggested, there is any correlation with regional house-shapes and types. But local styles and methods of finishing the stack need working out. The rush thatch is secured by hay-ropes crossed and recrossed in various patterns or applied as a continuous spiral (Fig. 51).

Flax, probably one of the oldest Irish crops, was grown very widely before the Industrial Revolution brought a concentration in the north-east. Small patches are still grown in Donegal for the sole purpose of providing the thatch, the tradition of flax cultivation surviving long after the home industries of spinning and weaving died out. Though mechanical pullers are now being adopted, the flax crop, which must be drawn out, roots and all, is one that lends itself to hand labour. Teams of 8 or a dozen pullers—and sometimes as many as thirty—work together, the men being exchanged or "swapped" between neighboring farms, and a day of flax-pulling traditionally ended with dancing.

9: Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1942
ER6 Rural Irish ER6

248 ●
[246]
[284]

Fig. 51.

or " swapped " between neighbouring farms, and a day of flax-pulling traditionally ended with dancing. The flax is harvested in August, after the fleeting pale blue flower has gone. Prepared beforehand and lying ready to hand in bundles of 60 or so (enough for a certain number of stooks) are the lint bands of green rushes for tying the sheaves or " beets." The bands consist of two lengths of rushes, placed with the flowering ends together and tied in a reef-knot with a single movement involving a quick manipulation of thumbs and fingers (Fig. 52). The beets are stooked heads down, in which position also they are drowned or " dubbed," as soon as may be, in the " lint hole " or flax dam, where soft water has been warming up ready for the steeping. A horizontal layer of beets and a covering of bracken weighted with large stones completes the filling of the dam, and the process of retting, which takes on the average 10 or 12 days, is soon advertized by a smell of foul yet fascinating intensity. We need not follow the flax on its career from the rank pit to

Fig. 52.

9: Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1942
ER6 Rural Irish ER6

248 the purest of linen—the story has often been told—and though the scutching mill with its busy waterwheel is an intimate part of the wintry countryside, the flax and tow soon pass into the factories. But we cannot omit a reference to the picturesque oblong stacks "sleighs" or "rays" in which the flax is built after being taken from the dam and dried. And we have referred in another place (Chapter 7), to the "shows" or waste which comes from the scutching mill.

243 But the most important crop throughout Ireland, and as a rule the most difficult to save because it comes late in the season, is oats. September is the harvest month, but in the hills October frequently sees the corn uncarried and even uncut. It is on record that in 1817—in Co. Armagh—"the grain was not reaped in many places until after Christmas." [422] Often the equinoctial gales play havoc with the stooks, and in the days of small scattered rundale plots it was customary for each holder to tie his sheaves with a proprietary knot so that he might claim his own.

243
412

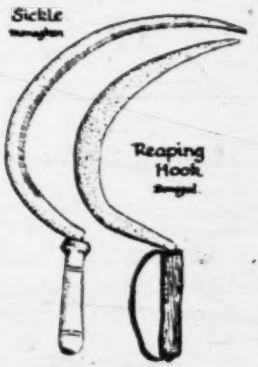

Fig. 53.

Both the toothed hook or sickle (Fig. 53) and the smooth "scythe hook" are used in reaping: the reaping machine and the self-binder have not reached many parts. Sickles are of several varieties, classified in the catalogues as round,

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
ER6 Rural Irish ER6
County Down

133
248

1. Flax in stook in drumlin country, Co. Down. Flax-dam on right.

2. Spreading flax from the dam, Co. Down.

[facing p. 96]

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
ER6 Rural Irish ER6

resting on a well-prepared bed of drawn straw spread on a hurdle, and he recalled the phrase 'soft as kiln bedding' to illustrate the care devoted to the operation. The Gaelic language has quite an extensive vocabulary describing every detail of the floor and the bedding of a corn-kiln. Because of the risk of fire, the Laws stipulated that the kiln must not be placed within so many paces of the dwelling house.

Lint-kilns, for drying flax after it had been taken from the retting dams, were in general use in Ulster in the days of hand-scutching, and a few half-ruined specimens are still in existence. As with corn-kilns—and lime-kilns—they were of two kinds, which may be termed pot-kilns and pipe-kilns. The former are described in Co. Armagh as 'small sod buildings, left open at the top . . . built by the sides of fences near the cabins: they are four or five feet in diameter, and have a hurdle of sticks placed across them at a convenient height (about four feet) on which a small quantity of flax is spread to dry over a turf fire'.[1] The stone-built kilns, known in Co. Tyrone as 'farrows' were similar in construction to the 'tobacco pipe' corn-kilns. The flax, well shaken and loose, was placed on end on a wattled platform set across the bowl of the pipe. When dried it was beaten on a melling-stone with a heavy wooden mell until every stalk was flattened and it then passed to the hand-scutcher.

As the corn-drying kiln has been superseded by the kiln attached to the country grist-mill, so the small lime-kiln has given way, over most of the country, to the large quarry-kiln. At the same time coal has replaced turf as a fuel. The little circular pot-kiln of sods or stones filled with alternate layers of turf and limestone may be met with in the west, but in general the home-burning of lime did not long survive the Great Famine. Down to that time, wherever limestone could be obtained, almost every farm or farm cluster had a lime-kiln. It was the importation of guano and later of artificial manure that put an end to a most advantageous practice. The application of lime to acid soils is a comparatively recent practice, but one likes to think that the little pot-kiln was in use long ago to burn lime or sea-shells for the whitewash with which the mud houses were lightened and brightened. Kelp-kilns, similarly (see Chapter

[1] I. Binns, *Miseries and Beauties* (1837), I, 178.

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
ER6 Rural Irish ER6

farms today. The scythed grass is shaken out by hand and spread thinly over the field. When partly dry it is gathered into windrows and lapped or coiled, that is folded against the leg over the forearm into small 'lap-cocks' resembling a lady's muff, the hole permitting the wind to pass through and the smooth rounded top allowing the rain to run off. Like all practised hand-work it is a job carried through with apparently mechanical indifference, but the old hands will take care to ensure that the laps are properly made and laid down so that they are aligned with the prevailing wind. Even on rich lowland farms the hay will be 'lapped' if it is first season's grass grown, as in Ulster, for the seed, which is a valuable export. Alternatively seed grass is tied in sheaves and 'gaited' like flax or stooked like a cereal crop (Fig. 51).

246

[439]

[248]

[243]

FIG. 51. Laps of hay, gaits of flax and stook of wheat, with 'hudders'.

When dry the laps are shaken open and built into small cocks or lumps which are later enlarged into hand cocks. Or if the hay is in good condition it is made, chiefly in the drier parts of the country, into larger ricks or tramp cocks which are trodden down firmly and secured with a hay-rope (Fig. 52, 10). The process of hay-making is thus, like the winning of turf (Chapter XIV), one of gradually increasing the size of the pile as the material is dried by sun and wind. The cocked hay is left standing for some weeks in the fields to season, so that it seems to the English visitor, as Arthur Young remarked, that the Irish are generally two months 'making or marring their hay'.[1] The explanation given is the necessity of avoiding overheating, but English critics say that it is the farmers who dislike getting overheated! A more charitable view is that by the

[1] A. Young, *Tour*, 2, 246.

[Text continues on p. 155]

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
ER6 Rural Irish ER6

246
284
184
248
243

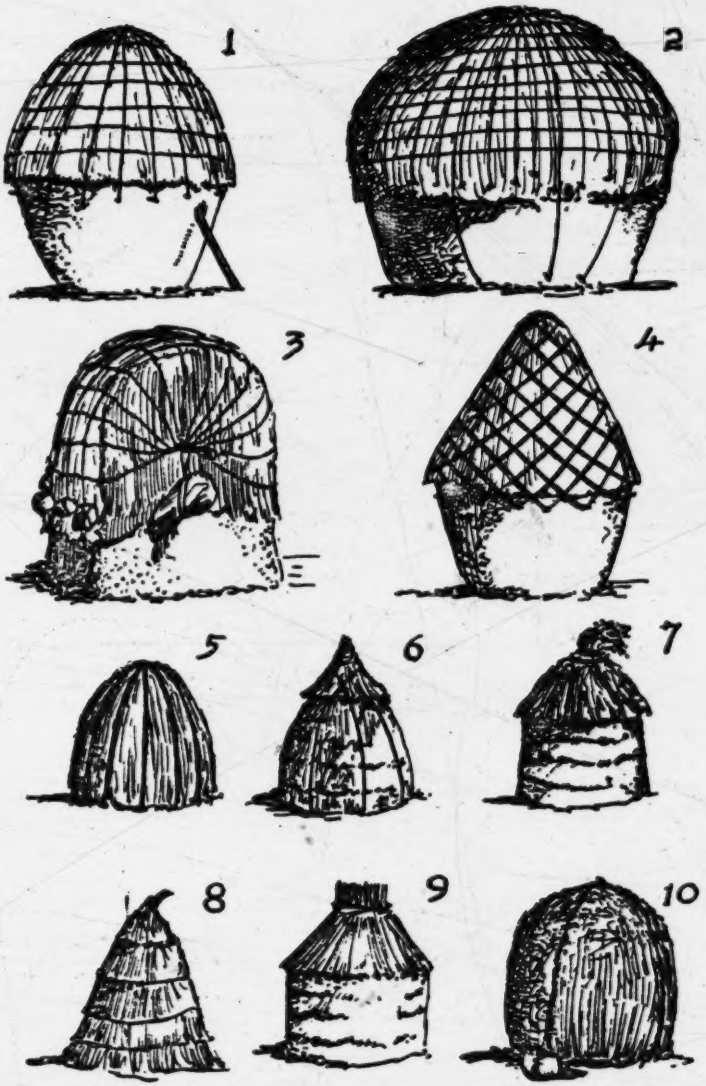

FIG. 52. Stacks and huts roped in many patterns. (1) Cavan (flax). (2) Cork (hay). (3) Mayo (hay). (4) Antrim (oats). (5) Donegal (hay). (6) Donegal (oats). (7) Down (oats). (8) Down (seed hay). (9) Cavan (oats). (10) Down (tramp-cock of hay).

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
ER6 Rural Irish ER6

HARVEST

When the scythe was transferred from the mowing of hay to the cutting of corn during the second half of last century there was much opposition from the reapers, sometimes for the good reason that little fields full of great boulders or the stumps of bog-fir gave no space to swing a scythe, and a single blow on the fast-moving point may ruin the blade. But one suspects that conservatism was rooted in magic. It is said that the rice-growers of Malaya refuse to use a scythe because its slashing motion would frighten away the spirits of the rice. Some such notion may have strengthened the Irishman's condemnation of the scythe. And I find another curious parallel with the Far East. The Malayan reaper hums like an insect while he is cutting the rice, perhaps to soothe the spirits of the living crop. In Ireland there is an old belief that an insect kept in a little box fastened to the handle of hook or scythe will bring luck and give the blade greater cutting power. Both scythe and sickle are personal possessions and their luck is personal: they are loaned with reluctance. When a sickle is borrowed it should not be passed directly from hand to hand but thrown on the ground and then picked up. This belief, which applies to all pointed objects, may be explained by the danger of handling a sharp tool, for bad luck is often related to bad practice.

But before coming to corn harvest the handling of flax should be described. Unpleasant handling it is, even if not quite so onerous (and odorous) as working with hemp or jute. When grown for fibre flax is harvested after the pale blue flowers have fallen but before the seed ripens, and because it is the stalk that is being harvested it is not cut but pulled up by the roots. 'Lint' is a crop of the small family farm, for many hands are required, teams or 'boons' of anything from half a dozen to thirty people gathering from neighbouring farms and working together in a festival spirit which reaches its climax in the evening dance. The tough flax is hard on the hands and the stooping is back-breaking. But the beets (sheaves) are carefully put together, for they have to be spread after retting and the stalks should lie evenly. The three handfuls which compose the beet are laid down at slightly different angles so that they will separate easily. A standard beet is reckoned to be 22 inches in diameter. The bands (ties) are prepared beforehand and consist

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
ER6 Rural Irish ER6

248 [284] of two lengths of green rushes knotted at the flowering end. When tied, the end of the band is thrust under towards the head of the beet, that is 'with the grain' of the flax. The beets are carried as soon as possible to be steeped (drowned or dubbed) in the flax dam or 'lint hole' where soft peaty water has been standing for some days to warm up. If they cannot be steeped forthwith the beets are built into stooks, for they are damaged if left lying on the ground. The beets are placed upright in the dam, with a slight inclination to facilitate their later removal, and when well packed may be covered, if the water is deep enough, with a horizontal layer or 'sheeting row' on which large boulders are placed to keep the flax under water. The process of retting (rotting) takes from seven to twelve days and is soon advertised by a foul and penetrating odour as the core or 'bone' of the stalk decays. Then the slimy, stinking beets are taken out of the dam and 'grassed', that is spread on grass, usually a new-mown hayfield. This is a skilled but dirty (Pl. 5, 2) job. To ensure that the stalks do not stick together the beets are shaken loose over the left forearm so that the flax lies evenly in ordered rows. After a couple of days it is once more tied into beets, but if the weather is bad it is first 'gaited' for a day or so to complete the drying (Fig. 51). This provides one of the more picturesque scenes of flax harvest, for the gaits look like the skirts of invisible dancers or the tents of a fairy host. The drying stalks of each beet are gathered and spread around the leg to make a hollow broad-based cone which will stand upright. It seems probable that gaiting was at one time a method of drying cereal crops as well as flax in these difficult Highland regions. The 'gaitner' was a recognized member of the harvest gang in Northumberland in the early nineteenth century. 'He follows close on the reapers and, the corn being laid in the band near the tops of the corn, he . . . brings the sheaf up to the left knee, gives the band a peculiar twist and sets the sheaf upright, giving it a half turn so that the skirts fly out to look like the cover of a beehive'.[1] Gaited corn was said to 'win' well and it was carried to the stack without stooking.

Ideally the flax after gaiting is ready for breaking and scutching, and in the old days when the farmer was also a

[1] *Loudan's Encyclopaedia of Agriculture* (1831).

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
ER6 Rural Irish ER6

weaver it would be hung in the rafters to be used as required. Nowadays the scutching-mills cannot store all the flax they handle, so that the farmer stacks it in the fields until the mill can take it. It is built into large oblong stooks variously known as barts, sleighs, hovels or rays, containing as many as a hundred beets or more. The barts are two-storied. On top of the first storey, which consists of three rows of beets on each side, a row of sheaves is placed along each eave like wall-plates, and others are laid transversely between them. On these, in turn, a central row is placed lengthwise to act as a support for the upper storey, and against this row two or three layers of sheaves are laid like rafters on each side. The hipped roof is then thatched with grass or rushes roped on (Fig. 54). The bart[1] is thus kept

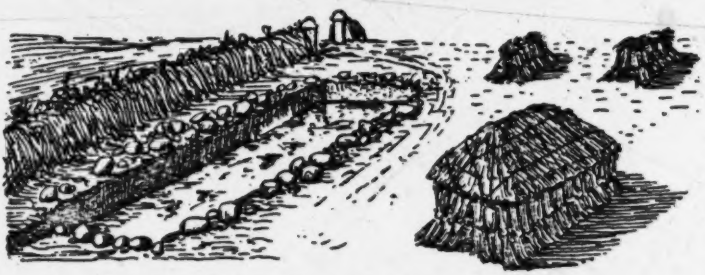

FIG. 54. Flax dam, stooks and bart.

dry while its open structure allows the wind to blow through, drying the beets and also lessening the risk of its being blown down. The farmer-weaver, needing the fibre, might have to dry the flax in a kiln after it had lain spread for a few days (Chapter IX). The whole sequence of breaking (melling) the flax, scutching, cloving, hackling, spinning, weaving, and bleaching was then carried out by hand. The water-driven scutching mill was introduced in the eighteenth century though hand-scutching continued in some districts into the present century. All processes are now mechanized apart from a little high-quality hand-loom weaving in Ulster, and very little flax is home-grown even in the traditional linen districts.

[1]'Bearts' of oats are referred to in medieval documents. See W. R. Wilde in *Census of Ireland 1851*, Part 5, Vol. 1, 98.